

ALA PLASTICA / RAFAEL SANTOS

MAGDALENA OIL SPILL, 1999

Argentine collaborative group project addressing an oil spill in Rio de La Plata
Photo series, screening and text.

On January 15th 1999, two cargo ships, one of them a oil tanker, crashed in the Rio de La Plata, close to its mouth in a navigable channel 600 meters wide by the city of Magdalena. By January 20th sixteen kilometers of riverbanks were covered with 5000 tons of oil, devastating flora and fauna and poisoning the water and community in an area considered a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve.

Between January 18th and February 10th Ala Plastica developed a qualitative assessment, including a field survey, aerial observation and satellite imagery analysis of the coastal area in coordination with the local authority and a local UNESCO agency. A priority task for Ala Plastica was to evaluate the consequences on the ecosystem from different points of view. They organized a riverside survey team including reed harvesters, fishermen, scientists, a fauna rescue group (from the La Plata City Zoo) and a team that released public documents about the oil spill on a daily basis.

The “Magdalena Oil Spill” photo series by Ala Plastica’s Rafael Santos, an artist and environmentalist, was able to expose the consequences of the catastrophe on the environment and local community. The photographs also helped inspire the Shell Company to address its responsibilities for the clean-up proactively.

Through these actions Ala Plastica created community links and called upon local knowledge to evaluate impact, resulting in a healing process. A public screening of the project will be shown on the streets of downtown Magdalena as a “community memory exercise” on the anniversary in 2007.

Bio

Ala Plastica is an arts and environmental organization based in Argentina that develops projects for public and intervention art. Their main concern is to link an artist way of thinking and working with the development of active projects in the social and environmental realm. In operation since 1991, the organization creates unconventional artworks focused on local and regional problems. The group works in close collaboration with other artists, scientists and environmental groups, nationally and internationally.

Illustration: “Last Reed Harvest,” photograph

